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The Lehigh as a trout mecca?

For the first time, state to stock browns and rainbows down river. Sportsmen's groups laud the move.

By Christian Berg Of The Morning Call

The Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission will stock 50,000 juvenile trout in the Lehigh River this spring, part of an ongoing effort to enhance the river's coldwater fishery.

The agency plans to release 30,000 brown trout and 20,000 rainbow trout throughout a 24-mile section of the river from the confluence of Sandy Run in Luzerne County downstream to Palmerton in Carbon County.

The trout will be released as fingerlings — young fish that measure 3 to 4 inches long. Biologist Dave Arnold, the commission's regional fisheries manager, said rainbow trout released this spring could reach the minimum, legal harvest size of seven inches by the end of this summer, with brown trout reaching legal size by spring 2008.

The stockings, scheduled for May 17, represent a historic expansion of the state's trout-related efforts on the Lehigh, which in recent years has earned a reputation as one of the region's top trout-fishing destinations.

News of the increased trout stocking is being hailed by local sportsmen's clubs and professional fishing guides, who have long contended the river is more trout friendly than commission officials give it credit for.

"From our viewpoint, it appears the Fish Commission is finally looking at the Lehigh as a trout river," said Dean Druckenmiller, a licensed fishing guide and president of the Lehigh Coldwater Fishery Alliance. "... That's what we're shooting for, and we need to have them on board."

The commission has stocked adult and juvenile brown trout in a six-mile section of river from Frances E. Walter Dam downstream to Sandy Run for decades. However, the agency has never stocked trout below Sandy Run because lower portions of the river often become too warm to support them. Trout are coldwater fish that cannot tolerate water temperatures in excess of 70 degrees for extended periods of time.

The commission is willing to expand its river trout stockings this year partly because of operational changes at F.E. Walter Dam in Carbon County, where the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will release additional water from May-October to create whitewater boating opportunities and improve trout fishing. Although the additional water may not keep the river cold enough for trout all the way to Palmerton, commission officials believe enough cold water will be available for the fish to survive.

"We do have [temperature] concerns during the summer period, but we're willing to give it a shot," Arnold said. "[Trout] could go upstream or into a tributary for thermal refuge. I'm sure there are a lot of cold seeps in the Lehigh itself."

Bill Derhammer, president of the Lehigh River Stocking Association of Walnutport, said he is confident the trout will do well in the river, because his group regularly releases brown trout fingerlings as far south as Northampton.

"We know for sure our program is working, because we've been adhering to it for several years, and a number of large brown trout are being caught in excess of 16 inches," Derhammer said.

Leroy Young, the commission's fisheries management chief, said the agency will stock 50,000 additional trout fingerlings in booth 2008 and 2009. The trout will come from the commission's Huntsdale State Fish Hatchery in Cumberland County. Commission spokesman Dan Tredinnick said it costs the agency 20 cents to produce each fingerling, putting the annual cost of the program at \$10,000.

Fish stocked in the second and third years of the program will be marked, either by clipping a fin or administering a chemical marker that can be detected under a microscope. The agency will be able to sample trout populations in the river and determine the survival rate of the fingerlings it released.

"The locals have been requesting this, and we're going to give it a good faith effort," Young said. "If it works, fine. If it doesn't, we're not going to just keep pouring fish down a rat hole."

Generally speaking, the commission estimates about 15 percent of stocked fingerlings survive their first year, Tredinnick said.

The additional trout stockings by the commission will complement private efforts the LRSA and several other organizations have been supporting for more than a decade. The LRSA alone has released nearly 300,000 trout in the river between Bear Creek and Northampton since its inception in 1990.

With the combined efforts, the entire river from the base of F.E. Walter Dam all the way to Northampton will be stocked with trout for at least the next three years.

"It's about 50 miles," Derhammer said. "That's outstanding."

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